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Redemption Road

THE NEAR-CINEMATIC STORIES OF THREE SMART AND SUCCESSFUL WOMEN, EACH OF WHOM ENDURED A PAST RIFE WITH HOMELESSNESS, POVERTY AND ABUSE



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ose Cathy Handy had always believed in destiny, but as she sat shell-shocked and alone, forcing down an unappetizing breakfast at a Toronto shelter for homeless women, she simply couldn't fathom how — or why — she had arrived there.

Handy had a steady job working as an account analyst for RBC and had been spending most of her spare time preparing a bedroom for her first child's imminent arrival. But as she left home to give birth at the hospital, she noticed an eviction notice on her door. Her boyfriend had been pretending to go to work every day for six months, siphoning money from her bank account and neglecting to pay the rent.

BY VANESSA CRAFT

DANIEL EHRENWORTH

With a landlord unwilling to negotiate, Handy had to face the realization that she would have no home to return to.

This abrupt arrival at rock bottom 12 years ago came not only with fear and anger, but copious amounts of guilt — her baby daughter would never sleep in her new bedroom. “I sat at the table in the shelter and questioned how on earth I could have ended up in that situation,” says Handy, 40. “I was doing all the right things, so why didn’t I see it coming? I woke up every day thinking this wasn’t how my child’s life was supposed to start, that she deserved so much better than this. I was completely at a loss.”

Looking for ways to pass the time at the shelter, Handy came across a dusty, abandoned room functioning as a library. The discovery of unused business books, demographic studies and materials about women entrepreneurs sparked an old dream of starting her own company. “I’d always believed that one day I would go into business for myself,” she says with a shrug. “And at this point, I had literally nothing to lose. I thought, Maybe this could be my way out of here.”

Handy may be soft spoken with an easy smile, but she’s made of a mother bear’s fighting stock. Driven by a fierce desire to provide a home for her fledgling family, Handy parked herself at a pay phone and worked every contact she had from previous jobs in event planning and marketing. Eventually, she won her first contract — consulting for a women’s seminar from her make-shift “office.” “My daughter, Carole, would sleep in her stroller, and I would work from a bench in the shelter library with my papers in my lap because there was no desk,” she says. Within five months, Handy was able to move into a one-bedroom apartment. “The day my business picked up to the point



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that my daughter had to start daycare — and I could actually afford it — was a very big step for me.”

Handy, who was born in Cameroon, immigrated to Canada from France in 1993 and is fluent in French, has since built three successful consulting and HR businesses, including Bilingual Link, which has connected more than 16,000 job seekers with potential employers. What’s next for the ambitious entrepreneur? She’s in training to enter politics and hopes to become a viable candidate within the next five

years. “I don’t think the immigrant population realizes how much Canada has to offer them,” she says. “I want to help get these new communities feeling more involved.”

CATHRINE ANN, 52, shares a similar entrepreneurial mindset with Handy, but in her case, the drive to succeed manifested itself in a different way. Her childhood home plagued with poverty, alcoholism and abuse, Ann struggled without a positive influence to draw from. “I always tried to change my life, but I did it with criminal activity,” she says. “I grew up very impoverished and abused, so I thought the only way I could get anywhere in life was to cheat people. I would sleep at someone’s house, and steal their jewellery in the morning.”

It is difficult to imagine Ann, the vivacious president of Consumer Connection (an award-winning business that provides customer service monitoring) was ever down and out, let

alone the type of person to sleep on the streets or eat out of garbage cans. Talking to her is like catching up with an old friend; Ann chats a mile a minute, and is both warm and candid. Her list of professional accolades runs almost into the double figures, she's in the midst of working with a feature film production company in Hollywood to possibly make a film about her life, and she lives in a beautiful home in Sechelt, West Vancouver, miles away — physically and mentally — from her past. It's no wonder Tinseltown is interested; her life reads like a movie script.

When Ann was four, a family friend molested her while she sat on the couch under a blanket. Her father — drunk and just five feet away — was fixing the television and had no idea what was happening to his daughter. The family moved often because her father spent all the rent money on alcohol, and the abusers (usually her dad's drinking buddies and neighbours) always seemed to find Ann.

Bullied at school and desperate for love and affection, Ann became pregnant and had a baby, Michael, at 15. Her mother's disapproval ("She told me if she'd known how I'd turn out, she would have drowned me when I was born") and the constant fighting between her parents pushed her out of the house. She began riding around on the subway with the baby, sleeping in public bathrooms or hitchhiking as far away as Florida just to get away. When Ann was truly desperate for food or money, she went to visit her uncle, a successful businessman in Toronto, who forced her to sleep with his clients or employees before he would give her money.

Continuous periods of street life were to follow; even after finding an apartment, Ann found it hard to avoid

spates of theft and prostitution. Yet over the years, she maintained links to the real world — going to medical school for two years (she faked her entrance papers and when caught, "ran away, like I always did") and working in a variety of sales and office jobs. "I always said even when I was falling on my face, I was moving forward," Ann says. "I sometimes had a glimmer of hope that there was more for me, but I just didn't know how to get there."

The turning point came in the form of good old-fashioned romance. Ann met her husband, Marc Joncas, who worked flipping burgers at a restaurant, and decided to give the straight and narrow another try. "I told him, 'Quit this job and let's go make millions,'" she says. "And he did! He believed in me that much, and it changed my life."

Ten years later, the company is still thriving. Ann makes regular donations through her business to charity, and does numerous speaking engagements every year. "I think the greatest part of my success today is that I'm now able to help others," she says proudly.

CHERI DiNOVO doesn't have to look far to be reminded of what could have been. Her spacious, high-ceilinged office, where she spends her days as a Toronto MPP, overlooks Queen's Park, one of the places the 58-year-old used to spend nights as a homeless teenager.

"Home just wasn't a safe place," says DiNovo when asked how she ended up as a street kid. Not one to beat around the bush, the affable, straight-talking politician is surprisingly comfortable relaying the details of her rocky child-

HOME WORK

LIA GRIMANIS, a 37-year-old Toronto account executive, has more than just a story of her journey from homelessness to success — she's the common bond between Rose Cathy Handy, Cathrine Ann and Cheri DiNovo. Together, with 12 other women and two children from across North America, they make up the charitable foundation **UP WITH WOMEN**, which Grimanis founded to empower women dealing with the stigma of homelessness. She was recently named to an international list of women making an impact on the economic opportunities of their peers. "I was homeless as a teenager," she says, "and I made a promise to myself that when I became successful I would come back and share my story with the women who need hope today."

Ann put together an airtight business plan with help, in part, from the government-funded SEEDS business development centre. Then the work really started. "For a year, I was commuting five hours a day to get to that class," she says. "Marc and I would sit at an old table, making sales calls. We even had a tape recorder of phones ringing in the background to make us sound like we were busy." In just the first year, Consumer Connection made \$85,000. Ann was 42, and her life was finally beginning.

hood during a lunch break at the Ontario legislature. "My parents had a very rocky relationship. When I was in my early teens, my stepfather shot himself in front of me." By the time she was 21, both of DiNovo's parents were dead. Without anywhere to go, she began couch surfing, sleeping on the streets and "doing whatever I needed to get by," which included selling and using drugs.

The constant search for shelter — and a full stomach — led DiNovo to make a connection that would become

a major turning point in her life. "My first run-in with the church was to get a free meal," she says, smiling at the memory. "The food got me through the door, but what kept me there was a mentor in the form of a caring, non-judgmental minister." Where once she saw little for her future, DiNovo became invested in building a life for herself, eventually getting married, having children (Francesca, now 31, and Damien, 26) and starting a successful headhunting service for female job seekers, which afforded her a comfortable lifestyle.

But the material spoils of success felt hollow to DiNovo after her past experiences. Rather than continuing to collect for herself, she wanted to do work that would give back to others. She felt a strong call to the church, and decided to return to school and join the ministry. The family downsized its house and budgeted accordingly.

While in the seminary, tragedy found her again. Her husband was killed in a motorcycle accident. "It was devastating," she says, having since remarried. "I felt like I'd been thrown back onto the streets again. I was completely on my own."

DiNovo says her faith — and the lessons in resilience learned on the streets — helped her survive a terrible period in her life. She completed her studies and was ordained as a United Church minister, running an inner-city church for marginalized communities. After deciding she wanted to get more involved in social activism, DiNovo made a move into politics, and was elected as a representative for the NDP at 55. Since then, she has introduced a bill to bring minimum wage earners up to the poverty line and has created a "girls' government" program to get "young girls excited about issues and to carry them through."

"I don't think you can be successful in this world if you're not compassionate or a giving person," says DiNovo. She gestures around her large, airy office. "I work in such a privileged place every day and it makes me constantly aware of the impetus to give back."

WHEN THESE WOMEN talk about their pasts, there is one word that keeps recurring: *shame*.

"Shame keeps people quiet," says DiNovo, who believes that sharing her story is a key way to act as a mentor to other women in need. "But stories like ours need to be told over and over again. It's the secrets that kill us."

In Ann's case, feelings of shame and abandonment caused her to identify with criminal street life. Meanwhile, Handy, even when she needed them most, chose not to reach out to family members or friends for help. "I wanted to get back up on my own and didn't want to run to anyone for help."

Handy, now a mother of two and a bone cancer survivor (an eight-inch scar scissors its way up her forearm), agrees with DiNovo about being open about her experience. She adds that in times of crisis, women simply can't afford to feel sorry for themselves. "You can't allow the actions of someone else affect your destiny or shape the rest of your life," she says. "The victim mentality makes you powerless. Whether I was being diagnosed with cancer or living in a shelter, I refused to believe that could really be the end for me."

For such a unique and arduous journey, it's ironic that a cliché best sums up Handy's biggest lesson. "You know that expression about when one door closes, another opens?" she asks. "Forget about the door; the whole world is waiting. Just go through the window instead. Jump through it if you have to." **M**